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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

18 December 1956

STAFF MEMO: 97-56

SUBJECT : The Danger of War in the Event of Revolt in Poland and  
East Germany

1. The idea that the outbreak of open resistance to the Soviet-controlled regime in East Germany would bring with it grave danger of general war appears to have won wide acceptance. We believe that this concept deserves closer examination. In accord with our belief that current prospects in East Germany must be viewed in the context of possible developments in Poland, this memorandum discusses a) the current situation in Poland, b) the prospects for revolt in East Germany given alternative developments in Poland, and c) the hypothesis that there would be acute danger of war if an East German revolt did occur.

The Continuing Instability in Poland

2. There are signs that the temperature of Polish political life is rising rapidly. Recent violent incidents indicate that considerable numbers of people are not amenable to the regime's arguments regarding the necessity for the Polish-Soviet alliance and the dangers of anti-Soviet provocations. Soviet intervention in Hungary remains an extremely live issue, inflaming Polish opinion and perhaps shaming many Poles who are proud of their traditional nationalism against hopeless odds.

3. The activities of "hooligan" elements are not a sufficient explanation of recent incidents. Regime spokesmen are probably justified in hinting darkly that pro-Soviet elements ousted from the Party leadership in October are seeking to provoke Soviet intervention. Some of the Party intelligentsia, fervent in their belief in "humanitarian socialism" as Poland's message to the world, continue to distrust Gomulka. Party discipline remains weak: provincial organs continue indiscriminate shakeups despite Warsaw's warnings, and journalists returned from Budapest, finding

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their articles censored, are touring the country to address mass meetings. Meanwhile, the basically anti-Communist majority is probably divided as to whether the time is ripe for proceeding to "the second stage" of the Polish revolution.

4. The Soviet Union continues to exercise unprecedented restraint in the face of grave provocation, including such incidents as Polish departures from Bloc unity at the UN and in the controversy with Tito; the new freedom for religious education in the schools; the fragmentation of the youth organization and the rejection of Party control over it; the similar independence of trade unions from Party control; and outspoken press attacks on Stalinism coupled with statements clearly implying that the USSR still adheres to Stalinism. The Soviet leaders may be directing the maneuvers of the Nutalingroup, but the Soviet public position is solid support for Gomulka, who is evidently still regarded as the best guarantor of Soviet interests. Soviet press coverage of Poland, however, is devoted not to Gomulka's program or his accomplishments but to his difficulties with anti-Soviet and anti-Party elements and to deplorable weakness in the security organs. Without specifically referring to Poland, Pravda on 12 December criticized articles in the Communist press which deviate from Marxism and help reaction. While this propaganda does not point to an early Soviet intervention, it does seem to leave Poland on probation.

5. Gomulka will almost certainly continue to give first priority to Polish-Soviet relations. He will also considerably increase his use of repressive methods - penalties for party indiscipline, more extensive censorship, closer control over public meetings, etc. - if persuasion produces no better results than at present. The outbreak of anti-regime violence on a large scale, which would almost certainly precipitate Soviet intervention, remains unlikely at present, mainly because Gomulka has not yet exhausted the credit he won in October and therefore insufficient unity exists for mass action against the regime. So long as Hungarian resistance continues, however, various disaffected groups are likely to have a fertile field of popular unrest in which to work, and the situation will remain potentially explosive.

East Germany

6. Except in the event of a prior Polish revolt, an East German uprising is unlikely. Although discontent is at a high pitch, especially among students and workers, and is being sustained although probably not increased by the continued Hungarian crisis, it is being met firmly by a united party. The Party split which played such a key role in Poland and Hungary appears unlikely, given the highly vulnerable position of the SED in the country. Official propaganda has impressed upon SED members and the police that the first act of the Hungarian rebels was to lynch Communists and policemen. The presence of nearly half a million Soviet soldiers, the

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belief that Western aid would not be forthcoming, and memories of June 1953, will probably act as effective deterrents.

7. A Polish uprising involving Soviet forces would increase the chances of an East German revolt by raising emotional tensions and improving East German estimates of the chances of success. This would be particularly true in areas vacated by Soviet troops required in Poland. On the other hand, the Germans might conclude from their experiences in 1953 and from the current Hungarian resistance that passive forms of struggle, including the general strike would be most effective. A general strike would always carry the danger of a wider outbreak of violence.

Risks of War in Case of an East German Revolt

8. There appears to be a widely held view among Western leaders and the press that a revolt in East Germany would lead to World War III. In our opinion, this possibility has been overstressed and it is more probable that the potential danger in this situation would be contained. The USSR would certainly have every interest in preventing a broader conflict from developing. West Germany, NATO, and the US have formally stated that they would not intervene with force in the Satellite area. Spontaneous efforts by West Germans on any significant scale to aid the East Germans would be unlikely and could be contained by the Federal Republic. The risks would of course increase if there should be protracted fighting in East Germany, but resistance could probably not be prolonged against the very large Soviet forces which would be available.

9. The risks of Western involvement would arise almost entirely from the special situation of Berlin. The population in the western sectors would give aid and sanctuary to East Germans and Soviet forces would probably be unable to seal off the entire periphery of the western sectors. In this situation, the USSR would probably cut rail and road communications from West Germany on the plea of insecurity in the area. We do not consider it likely that the Soviets would interfere with access by air or would occupy the Western sectors of Berlin. Their aim would be to avoid a direct challenge to the Western Powers and to suppress resistance quickly. We estimate they would succeed in this.

10. The real risks of war if such a situation developed in East Germany would arise from the possibility that the Western Powers, perhaps under pressure of public opinion, might alter their present policy on the matter. If having given implicit assurances of non-intervention, they nevertheless took steps toward intervening, the risks of war by miscalculation would be very great. If such a change in the Western attitude did not occur,

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however, the USSR would almost certainly seek to avoid direct provocation and would probably be capable of suppressing resistance within a short time.

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